Agatha Christie

PROMOTION IN THE HIGHEST

A SHORT STORY

Promotion in the Highest

A Short Story

Agatha Christie

WITNESS IMPULSE
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Promotion in the Highest

They were walking down the hill from the little stone church on the hillside.

It was very early in the morning, the hour just before dawn. There was no one about to see them as they went through the village, though one or two sleepers sighed and stirred in their sleep. The only human being who saw them that morning was Jacob Narracott, as he grunted and sat up in the ditch. He had collapsed there soon after he came out of the Bel and Dragon last night.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes, not quite believing what he saw. He staggered to his feet and shambled off in the direction of his cottage, made uneasy by the trick his eyes had played him. At the crossroads he met George Palk, the village constable, on his beat.

"You'm late getting home, Jacob. Or should I say early?" Palk grinned.

Jacob groaned, and rocked his head in his hands.

"Government's been and done something to the beer," he affirmed. "Meddling again. I never used to feel like this."

"What'll your Missus say when she sees you rolling home at this hour?"

"Won't say anything. She's away to her sister's."

"So you took the opportunity to see the New Year in?"

Jacob grunted. Then he said uneasily: "You seen a lot of people just now, George? Coming along the road?"

"No. What sort of people?"

"Funny people. Dressed odd."

"You mean Beats?"

"Nah, not Beats. Sort of old-fashioned like. Carrying things, some of 'em was."

"What sort of things?"

"Ruddy great wheel, one had—a woman. And there was a man with a gridiron. And one rather nice looking wench, dressed very rich and fancy with a great big basket of roses."

"Roses? This time of year? Was it a sort of procession?"

"That's right. Lights on their heads they had, too."

“Aw, get on, Jacob! Seeing things—that’s what’s the matter with you. Get on home, put your head under the tap, and sleep it off.”

“Funny thing is, I feel I’ve seen ’em before somewhere—but for the life of me I can’t think where.”

“Ban the bomb marchers, maybe.”

“I tell you they was dressed all rich and funny. Fourteen of them there was. I counted. Walking in pairs mostly.”

“Oh well, some New Year’s Eve party coming home maybe: but if you ask me, I’d say you did yourself too well at the Bel and Dragon, and that accounts for it all.”

“Saw the New Year in proper, we did,” agreed Jacob. “Had to celebrate special, seeing as it wasn’t only ‘Out with the Old Year, and in with the New.’ It’s out with the old Century and in with the New one. January 1st, A.D. 2000, that’s what today is.”

“Ought to mean something,” said Constable Palk.

“More compulsory evacuation, I suppose,” grumbled Jacob. “A man’s home’s not his castle nowadays. It’s out with him, and off to one of these ruddy new towns. Or bundle him off to New Zealand or Australia. Can’t even have children now unless the Government says you may. Can’t even dump things in your back garden without the ruddy Council coming round and saying its got to go to the village dump. What do they think a back garden’s *for*? What it’s come to is, nobody treats you like you were *human* any more …”

His voice rumbled away …

“Happy New Year,” Constable Palk called after him …

The Fourteen proceeded on their way.

St. Catherine was trundling her Wheel in a disconsolate manner. She turned her head and spoke to St. Lawrence who was examining his Gridiron.

“What can I *do* with this thing?” she asked.

“I suppose a wheel always comes in useful,” said St. Lawrence doubtfully.

“What for?”

“I see what you mean—it was meant for torture—for breaking a man’s body.”

“Broken on the wheel.” St. Catherine gave a little shudder. “What are you going to do with your gridiron?”

“I thought perhaps I might use it for cooking something.”

“Pfui,” said St. Cristina as they passed a dead stoat.

St. Elizabeth of Hungary handed her one of her roses.

St. Cristina sniffed it gratefully. St. Elizabeth fell back beside St. Peter.

“I wonder why we all seem to have paired up,” she said thoughtfully.

“Those do, perhaps, who have something in common,” suggested Peter.

“Have we something in common?”

“Well, we’re both of us liars,” said Peter cheerfully.

In spite of a lie that would never be forgotten, Peter was a very honest man. He accepted the truth of himself.

“I know. I know!” Elizabeth cried. “I can’t bear to remember. How could I have been so cowardly—so weak, that day? Why didn’t I stand there bravely and say, “I am taking bread to the hungry?” Instead, my husband shouts at me, “What have you got in that basket?” And I shiver and stammer out “Nothing but roses …” And he snatched off the cover of the basket”—“And it *was* roses,” said Peter gently.

“Yes. A miracle happened. Why did my Master do that for me? Why did he acquiesce in my lie? Why? Oh why?”

St. Peter looked at her.

He said:

“So that you should never forget. So that pride could never lay hold of you. So that you should know that you were weak and not strong.”

“I, too—” He stopped and then went on.

“I who was so sure that I could never deny him, so certain that I, above all the others, would be steadfast. I was the one who denied and spoke those lying cowardly words. Why did he choose *me*—a man like me? He founded his Church on me—Why?”

“That’s easy,” said Elizabeth. “Because you loved him. I think you loved him more than any of the others did.”

“Yes, I loved him. I was one of the first to follow him. There was I, mending the nets, and I looked up, and there he was watching me. And he said, ‘Come with me.’ And I went. I think I loved him from the very first moment.”

“You are so nice, Peter,” said Elizabeth.

St. Peter swung his keys doubtfully.

“I’m not sure about that Church I founded … It’s not turned out at all as we meant …”

“Things never do. You know,” Elizabeth went on thoughtfully. “I’m sorry now I put that leper in my husband’s bed. It seemed at the time a fine defiant Act of Faith. But really—well, it wasn’t very *kind*, was it?”

St. Appolonia stopped suddenly in her tracks.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I’ve dropped my tooth. That’s the worst of having such a small emblem.”

She called: “Anthony. Come and find it for me.”

They were in the Land of the Saints now, and as they breathed its special fragrance St. Cristina cried aloud in joy. The Holy Birds sang, and the Harps played.

But the Fourteen did not linger. They pressed forward to the Court of Assembly.

The Archangel Gabriel received them.

“The Court is in Session,” he said. “Enter.”

The Assembly Chamber was wide and lofty. The walls were made of mist and cloud.

The Recording Angel was writing in his Golden Book. He laid it aside, opened his Ledger and said, “Names and addresses, please.”

They told him their names and gave their address. St. Petrock-on-the-Hill. Stickle Buckland.

“Present your Petition,” said the Recording Angel.

St. Peter stepped forward.

“There is unrest amongst us. We ask to go back to Earth.”

“Isn’t Heaven good enough for you?” asked the Recording Angel. There was, perhaps, a slight tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

“It is too good for us.”

The Recording Angel adjusted his Golden Wig, put on his Golden Spectacles, and looked over the top of them with disapprobation.

“Are you questioning the decision of your Creator?”

“We would not dare—but there was a ruling—”

The Archangel Gabriel, as Mediator and Intermediary between Heaven and Earth, rose.

“If I may submit a point of law?”

The Recording Angel inclined his head.

“It was laid down, by Divine decree, that in the Year A.D. 1000 and in every subsequent 1000th Year, there should be fresh Judgments and Decisions on such points as were brought to a special Court of Appeal. Today is the Second Millennium. I submit that every person who has ever lived on earth has today a right of Appeal.”

The Recording Angel opened a large Gold Tome and consulted it. Closing it again, he said:

“Set out your Case.”

St. Peter spoke.

“We died for our Faith. Died joyfully. We were rewarded. Rewarded far beyond our deserts. We—he hesitated and turned to a young man with a beautiful face and burning eyes. “You explain.”

“It was not enough,” said the young man.

“Your reward was not enough?” The Recording Angel looked scandalised.

“Not our reward. Our service. To die for the Faith, to be a Saint, is not enough to merit Eternal Life. You know my story. I was rich. I obeyed the Law. I kept the commandments. It was not enough. I went to the Master. I said to him: “Master, what shall I do to inherit Eternal Life?”

“You were told what to do, and you did it,” said the Recording Angel.

“It was not enough.”

“You did more. After you had given all your possessions to the poor, you joined the disciples in their mission. You suffered Martyrdom. You were stoned to death in Ephesus.”

“It was not enough.”

“What more do you want to do?”

“We had Faith—burning Faith. We had the Faith that can move mountains. Two thousand years have taught us that we could have done more. We did not always have enough Compassion …”

The word came from his lips like a breath from a summer sea. It whispered all round the Heavens …

“This is our petition: Let us go back to Earth in Pity and Compassion to help those who need help.”

There was a murmur of agreement from those around him.

The Recording Angel picked up the Golden Intercom on his desk. He spoke into it in a low murmur.

He listened …

Then he spoke—briskly, and with authority.

“Promotion Granted,” he said. “Approval in the Highest.”

They turned to go, their faces radiant.

“Hand in your Crowns and Halos at the door, please.”

They surrendered their Crowns and Halos and went out of the Court. St. Thomas came back.

“Excuse me,” he said politely. “But what you said just now—was it *Permission* Granted? Or was it *Promotion* Granted?”

“Promotion. After two thousand years of Sainthood, you are moving up to a higher rank.”

“Thank you. I *thought* it was promotion you said. But I wanted to make *sure*.”

He followed the others.

“He always had to make sure,” said Gabriel. “You know—sometimes—I can’t help wondering what it would be like to have an immortal soul …”

The Recording Angel looked horrified.

“Do be careful, Gabriel. You know what happened to Lucifer.”

“Sometimes I can’t help feeling a little sorry for Lucifer. Having to rank below Adam upset him terribly. Adam wasn’t much, was he?”

“A poor type,” agreed the Recording Angel. “But he and all his descendants were created in the image of God with immortal souls. They *have* to rank above the Angels.”

“I’ve often thought Adam’s soul must have been a very small one.”

“There has to be a beginning for everything,” the Recording Angel pointed out severely.

Mrs. Badstock heaved and pulled. The smell of the village dump was not agreeable. It was an unsightly mass of old tyres, broken chairs, ragged quilts, old kerosene tins, and broken bedsteads. All the things that nobody could possibly want. But Mrs. Badstock was tugging hopefully. If that old pram was anyway repairable—She heaved again and it came free …

“Drat!” said Mrs. Badstock. The upper portion of the pram was not too bad, but the wheels were missing.

She threw it down angrily.

“Can I help you?” A woman spoke out of the darkness.

“No good. Blasted thing’s got no wheels.”

“You want a wheel? I’ve got one here.”

“Ta, ducks. But I need four. And anyway, yours is much too big.”

“That’s why I thought we could make it into four—with a little adjustment.” The woman’s fingers strayed over it pushing, pulling.

“There! How’s that?”

“Well, I never! However did you—Now, if we’d got a nail or two—or a screw. I’ll get my hubby—”

“I think I can manage.” She bent over the pram. Mrs. Badstock peered down to try and see what was happening.

The other woman straightened up suddenly. The pram stood on four wheels.

“It will want a little oil, and some new lining.”

“I can see to that easy! *What* a boon it will be. You’re quite a little home mechanic, aren’t you, ducks? How on earth did you manage it?”

“I don’t know really,” said St. Catherine vaguely. “It just—happens.”

The tall woman in the brocade dress said with authority: “Bring them up to the house. There’s plenty of room.”

The man and the woman looked at her suspiciously. Their six children did the same.

“The Council are finding us somewhere,” said the man sullenly.

“But they’re going to separate us,” said the woman.

“And you don’t want that?”

“Of course we don’t.”

Three of the children began to cry.

“Shut your bloody mouths,” said the man, but without rancour.

“Been saying they’d evict us for a long time,” said the man. “Now they’ve done it. Always whining about their rent. I’ve better things to do with my money than pay rent. That’s Councils all over for you.”

He was not a nice man. His wife was not very nice either, St. Barbara thought. But they loved their children.

“You’d better all come up to my place,” she said.

“Where is it?”

“Up there.” She pointed.

They turned to look.

“But—that’s a *Castle*,” the woman exclaimed in awestruck tones.

“Yes, it’s a Castle all right. So you see, there will be lots of room …”

St. Scoithín stood rather doubtfully on the seashore. He wasn’t quite sure what to do with his Salmon.

He could smoke it, of course—it would last longer that way. The trouble was that it was really only the rich who like smoked salmon, and the rich had quite enough things already. The poor much preferred their salmon in tins. Perhaps—

The Salmon writhed in his hands, and St. Scoithín jumped.

“Master,” said the Salmon.

St. Scoithín looked at it.

“It is nearly a thousand years since I saw the sea,” said the Salmon pleadingly.

St. Scoithín smiled at him affectionately. He walked out on the sea, and lowered the Salmon gently into the water.

“Go with God,” he said.

He walked back to the shore, and almost immediately stumbled over a big heap of tins of salmon with a purple flower stuck on top of them.

St. Cristina was walking along a crowded City street. The traffic roared past her. The air was full of diesel fumes.

“This is terrible,” said St. Cristina, holding her nose. “I must do something about this. And why don’t they empty the dustbins oftener? It’s very bad for people.” She pondered. “Perhaps I had better go into Parliament …”

St. Peter was busy setting out his Loaf and Fish stall.

“Old Age Pensioners first,” he said. “Come on, Granddad.”

“Are you National Assistance?” the old man asked suspiciously.

“That kind of thing.”

“Not religious, is it? I’m not going to sing hymns.”

“When the food’s all gone, I shall preach,” said Peter. “But you don’t have to stay on and listen.”

“Sounds fair enough. What are you going to preach about?”

“Something quite simple. Just how to attain Eternal Life.”

A younger man gave a hoot of laughter.

“Eternal Life! What a hope!”

“Yes,” said Peter cheerfully, as he shovelled out parcels of hot fish. “It *is* a hope. Got to remember that. There’s always Hope.”

In the Church of St. Petrock-on-the-Hill, the Vicar was sitting sadly in a pew, watching a confident young architect examining the old painted screen.

“Sorry, Vicar,” said the young man, turning briskly. “Not a hope in Hell, I’m afraid. Oh! sorry again. I oughtn’t to have put it like that. But it’s long past restoring. Nothing to be done. The wood’s rotten, and there’s hardly any paint left—not enough to see what the original was like. What is it? Fifteenth century?”

“Late fourteenth.”

“What are they? Saints?”

“Yes. Seven each side.” He recited. “St. Lawrence, St. Thomas, St. Andrew, St. Anthony, St. Peter, St. Scoithín, and one we don’t know. The other side: St. Barbara, St. Catherine, St. Appolonia, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, St. Cristina the Astonishing, St. Margaret, and St. Martha.”

“You’ve got it all very pat.”

“There were church records. Not in very good condition. Some we had to make out by their emblems—St. Barbara’s castle for instance, and St. Lawrence’s gridiron. The original work was done by Brother Bernard of the Benedictines of Froyle Abbey.”

“Well, I’m sorry about my verdict. But everything has got to go sometime. I hear your rich parishioner has offered you a new screen with modern symbolical figures on it?”

“Yes,” said the Vicar without enthusiasm.

“Seen the big new Cathedral Centre at New Huddersfield? Coventry was good in its time, but this is streets ahead of it! Takes a bit of getting used to, of course.”

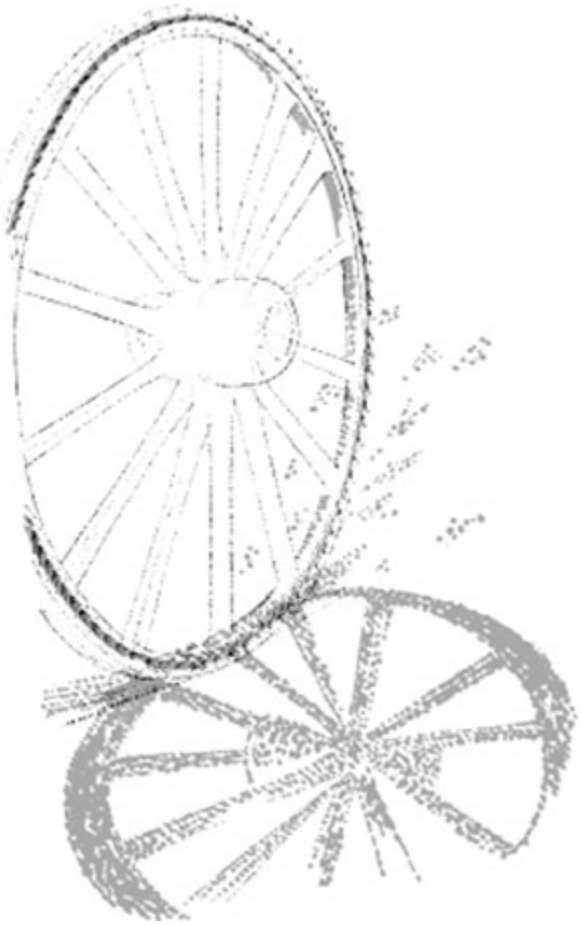
“I am sure it would.”

“But it’s taken on in a big way! Modern. Those old Saints,” he flicked a hand towards the screen. “I don’t suppose anyone knows who half of them

are nowadays. I certainly don't. Who was St. Cristina the Astonishing?"

"Quite an interesting character. She had a very keen sense of smell. At her funeral service the smell of her putrefying body affected her so much that she levitated out of her coffin up to the roof of the Chapel."

"Whew! Some Saint! Oh well, it takes all sorts to make a world. Even your old Saints would be very different nowadays, I expect …"



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About the Author

AGATHA CHRISTIE is the most widely published author of all time, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Her books have sold more than a billion copies in English and another billion in a hundred foreign languages. She died in 1976.

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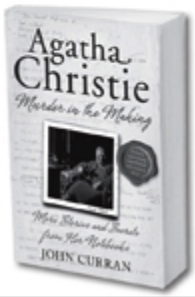

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